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ABSTRACT

Semistructured, group interviews of a small number of social workers attempted to discover their information needs, problems and possible solutions. Results reported in this document are little more than impressionistic and indicative because of the small number of social workers interviewed and the type of information gathered. The major problem of social workers involves research information--what has been done, what results have been reported, and what research is in progress on any particular topic. In attempting to formulate a solution, three factors about social workers as regards information must be kept in mind: (1) lack of motivation for searching; (2) shortage of time for reading; and (3) overwhelming preference for informal communication. To reach solutions to the information problems of social workers, it is suggested that new trial services be developed and then evaluated in terms of their effect. (SG)

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Investigation into Information Requirements of the Social Sciences

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Research Report no. 4

THE INFORMATION NEEDS OF SOCIAL WORKERS

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LI 002 738

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1. INTRODUCTION

This report will consider the findings of our investigation of social workers' information needs; the information problems identified; possible solutions to them; and finally, possible lines of future research. It thus goes beyond a factual report on our empirical investigation. There are two reasons for this. The first is that the amount and quality of our data are not sufficient for them to be reported without subjective interpretation. Secondly, the question of information services for social workers is currently receiving some attention, and it is therefore timely to make such relevant comments as seem justified by our findings.

The Investigation into Information Requirements of the Social Sciences concentrated, as explained in Research Report no. 1, mainly on researchers. A certain number of 'practitioners' were covered, among them some in the field of social work and welfare. It was expected that this group of users would have rather different problems from other users, and that different solutions might be called for.

2. METHODOLOGY

It was hoped at one stage that a questionnaire might be devised for circulation to a moderately sized sample of social workers. Indeed, a questionnaire was drawn up; for interest, this draft is included as Appendix A. However, as with the questionnaire devised for schoolteachers, exploratory interviews showed quite clearly that the questionnaire form was simply not a suitable method for investigating the information requirements of practitioners. Even individuals who knew already the nature and aims of our investigation, and knew what sort

of information was wanted, found it very difficult to answer the questions. There are two main reasons why this should be so. In the first place, social workers are not at all used to thinking along such lines as those in the questionnaire or seeing information in this sort of way; a questionnaire of this kind would demand a considerable reorientation of thinking. A second reason was one directly relevant to the information problems of social workers. As shown below, social workers greatly prefer, and mainly use, informal channels of communication; their use of the formal information system is small and erratic. It is very much easier to ask precise questions about the formal structured system than about informal communication, which tends by its nature to be unstructured. Questions about the formal system would, though valid, be difficult to answer, and cover only a small part of the problem; whereas questions about the informal system are extremely difficult to formulate in any valid form. A detailed study of informal information transfer, in whatever way it was carried out, would in any case have been beyond our resources.

In theory, a questionnaire could have been accompanied by a long letter of explanation, to orient the thinking of respondents in the right direction. However, such letters tend to remain unread; moreover, it would not have been possible to know whether they had read it or not, although the validity of their answers to the questions could well depend on this. Further, orientation of thinking is difficult to achieve without putting answers into the respondents' minds. Again in theory, prolonged study might well identify secondary factors as associated with certain types of information requirements (as certain precise factual questions are known to have high loadings on general personality factors); questions of high validity and reliability on these secondary factors could then be asked, so that a total picture of information needs could be built up. The work required to identify these factors, even if successful, was totally beyond our resources, and in any case could not have been carried out except by interview.

Diaries and other methods involving effort on the part of the respondent were ruled out. We were therefore thrown back on interviews as the main means of investigation. Semi-structured interviews were used; that is, the interviewers had a check list of points to be covered, but most of these points were covered in the interviews with minimal prompting, and direct questioning was used for the remainder. The choice of interviews meant that the number of individuals we could investigate was small. 28 persons in all were interviewed, all of them in groups, the total number of interviews being five. The interviews were conducted in two localities, Bath and Southampton. It is not therefore possible to generalise with any confidence from our findings on the information requirements of social workers. The results reported below must be regarded as little more than impressionistic and indicative. The small numbers involved, and the nature of the information collected, both rule out any statistical presentation of results. Nevertheless, we should point out that even within the few interviews we conducted, very similar patterns emerged, and we doubt whether an investigation on a larger scale would add much to our results or differ significantly from them.

The persons interviewed were as follows:

Superintendent of Mental Health Services (1)
Superintendent Health Visitor (1)
Medical Social Workers (3)
Child Care Officers (5)
Youth and Community Officer (1)
Probation Officers (17)

Interviews were conducted in groups, partly because this enabled us to interview more people within our time and resources, partly because this method had certain positive features. The presence of other colleagues often served as a stimulus in our semi-structured interviews; in particular, one person was usually able to fall in with our line of thinking more quickly than the rest, and to bring the rest along with him. Comments made by one person were supplemented or corrected by others, and not a few details emerged which would almost certainly not have appeared in a one-to-one interview situation.

It is interesting at this point to refer to the comments made in our Report on the Preliminary stage of INFROSS (April 1968) on the information needs of social workers; this section is reproduced as Appendix B.

3. CATEGORIES OF INFORMATION REQUIREMENT

The types of information required by social workers can be categorised in several ways. One convenient way is as follows:

i. Day-to-day information, about the local community within which social work is carried out, individual clients, etc.

ii. Factual information, e.g. on legal and medical matters.

iii. Information on relevant practical developments elsewhere.

iv. Information arising from relevant research.

Each of these is discussed in turn.

i. Day-to-day information

Much of the information a social worker needs is about his local community and the clients with whom he works. Much of this he already has from his own experience of the environment and the clients; the remainder is obtained from colleagues, and from other individuals (e.g. corporation officials, clients' doctors, etc.). This information may be formally documented by the social worker when he has received it, but his manner of obtaining it is entirely informal (if one includes among informal methods letters as well as personal conversations).

ii. Factual information

Within this category we include such quick reference enquiries as the address or secretary of an institution, the law relating to a

certain matter, medical facts relating to (e.g.)a particular symptom which may be a sign of drug dependence, etc. Apart from routine quick reference queries, a great deal of the information required in this field is legal or medical; a certain amount is psychological, but very little is sociological, economic or political. In fact, much if not most of the information required in this category is drawn from fields on the fringe of, or completely outside, the social sciences, which have themselves relatively little to contribute. (The social science literature has of course a good deal to say about such topics as drug dependency, but not in a way or at a level which is practically useful to the social worker).

iii. Information on practical developments

This may be specific (e.g. whether any other counties are currently experimenting in a particular kind of community care for the old); or general (e.g. what are the current trends in geriatric hospitals). From our evidence, this information is either already known or not found. If it is known, it has been picked up from colleagues or other persons, or through social work journals or books; to take the example of geriatric hospitals again, the book Sans everything was mentioned by one of the interviewees. Whatever the source of information, the procedure is generally casual and very unsystematic. There was a feeling among some of the persons interviewed that they would like to be kept more in touch with relevant trends in such fields as behaviour therapy, but motivation was very rarely strong enough to make them pursue such information, and they had very little idea of how they would find material of this kind. Public libraries were mentioned by one or two interviewees as places where they might go to browse for general or specific background material. The press (dailies and weeklies in particular), television and radio were mentioned by several people; one suspects that the amount of background information picked up in these ways accounts for a high proportion within this category. Although coverage of social issues is spasmodic, and allowance has to be made for bias, this information may be of considerable value, so long as its recipients have an adequate frame of reference against which to interpret it, and so long as it is supplemented by other and more adequately documented sources.

iv. Information from relevant research

Comments on this were not spontaneously volunteered by those interviewed. In response to a certain amount of probing, several said they would welcome some easy means of keeping in touch with relevant research, but stressed that this must consist of research findings which had been well tested and were capable of being put into practice, not basic research. There was almost no motivation to hunt for material of this kind, and it seemed fairly clear that only if the information were potted in some very brief and acceptable way would it be used at all. Unlike schoolteachers, social workers were not fundamentally suspicious about the research being conducted which might be relevant to them; indeed, when the question was mentioned, some of them expressed something of a conscience about their unawareness of what was going on in the field.

These four categories are in order of immediacy of information required, and also in order of motivation to hunt for information; probably also in order of importance to social workers. Day-to-day information social workers must have, and though most of it is readily accessible, they are prepared to hunt for it because they must. Most factual information is a necessity too, though unawareness of possible sources of factual information may mean that relevant information is sometimes not obtained. For information on relevant practical developments there is a generalised motivation, and for research information almost none at all. It is most important to bear in mind this question of motivation when attempting to improve existing services or plan new ones for social workers.

4. USE OF LITERATURE

The social workers interviewed all had access to a small number of journals, about six or seven, in their department or office. These were a mixture of social work journals, such as Case Conference, general journals such as New Society, and the occasional specialist journal such as International Journal of Social Psychiatry. These journals probably enable them to keep in touch with major developments and changes in attitudes in their own field (through the social work journals), general trends and trends in other areas (from New Society), and occasional research findings (from the academic journals). In some cases, one member of a department, perhaps a senior one, undertook a 'gatekeeper' role by passing notes of relevant articles to other members of the department. Our findings are reinforced by those of McCulloch and Brown[1], who found that journal reading by social workers was slight - the average number of journals read by their respondents was about two. If this figure applies to our interviewees, they read only a selection of the few journals available in their own department. Brown and McCulloch[2] also found that though 33 per cent of medical social workers stated that they had found some published research to be helpful, only 5 per cent placed social work research in the upper half of factors which they recognised as being helpful in their day-to-day practice; it ranked far below professional training, own experience, discussion with colleagues, own personality, literature on social work practice, and supervision. From Brown and McCulloch's rank order of helpful factors, it will be noted that all the top ones were informal.

One or two of our interviewees, while accepting the large size of the literature that might be relevant to them, expressed fears about being overloaded with information. They would have neither time nor motivation to sift through a large quantity of literature, much of which might be of no more than marginal relevance to them. Abstracting and indexing journals were not mentioned by any interviewee, and none

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[1] McCulloch, J. Wallace & Brown, Malcolm J. What do social workers read? New Society, 17 October 1968, 570.

[2] Brown, Malcolm J. & McCulloch, J. Wallace. Research findings relevant to some characteristics of the medical social worker. Medical Social Work, 1968, 200-204.

of them expressed any real idea of how to search for information on a specific topic, other than by asking a colleague or possibly going to the public library (and that only for more general information). When the idea of digests of relevant research was put to them, it received some welcome, and the need for evaluation of the research during the process of packaging was accepted, so long as the evaluation had been done by subject experts.

Perhaps rather surprisingly, the professional institutes were not mentioned very much, though one or two persons had had recourse to them on occasion. At any rate, they did not spring to mind as an obvious source of information.

5. INFORMATION PROBLEMS

If our findings are at all representative, it can reasonably be said that in our first two categories of information - day-to-day information, and factual information - there is very little problem to be solved. If the current factual reference books are kept up to date, as they undoubtedly will be, they meet a very high proportion of the needs of the second category; and there is no reason why the informal system should not continue to work as well for both categories as it does now.

In the third category, information on relevant practical developments, there probably is something of a problem; one would guess that some experiments in social welfare have been carried out in a local authority in ignorance of the success or failure of similar experiments elsewhere. There would seem to be two main ways of dealing with this: by making available better, and more fully cumulated, indexes to the journals which report practical developments; and by recourse to professional institutions such as the National Child Bureau. It would seem most satisfactory if both these solutions could be combined into one, i.e. if the appropriate professional institution could maintain a cumulative index of relevant literature, and act as a clearing house for information that was unpublished. The volume of work involved should not be unmanageably great. The existence of such a service would itself attract information on current developments, which in turn would generate more queries. The specialised institutions are probably in a far better position to obtain such information than any fully centralised system; there would undoubtedly be a certain amount of overlap in interests between institutions, but this need cause no problem at all if information and index entries gathered by one institution and believed to be relevant also to another institution are automatically sent to it. Such a system would obviously work much more efficiently if the indexing and classification systems used were fully compatible, and this would require a fair amount of central coordination and control.

Many if not most public libraries issue book lists from time to time, and some of these probably reach some of the social welfare departments. Information tailored more to the specific needs of social welfare departments - which are after all controlled and financed by the same local authority as the public library - could perhaps be provided by public libraries, in the form of notifications of relevant literature.

The extra work involved would be very small, and the benefit might justify it. A national service of this sort would probably be of much less value, as it would list a lot of books which were unavailable locally, and this would require a greater motivation to obtain the material than social workers appear to possess. If select reading lists issued by public libraries produced a greater demand for material from social welfare departments, this might in turn stimulate public libraries to buy more in this area.

The major information problem appears to be in the field of research information. It should be stressed that this term is not intended to include all 'academic' information; for example, the theoretical literature of, say, sociology is of almost no interest, relevance or value to social workers. It is the findings of research, e.g. on the causes and cures of enuresis, that should somehow be conveyed to the social worker. Here it should be remembered that the total bulk of potentially relevant literature is enormous; at least, the bulk of journals in which it might be contained is enormous, though the number of items in these journals that would qualify as relevant would be very much smaller.

6. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Before considering possible solutions to this problem, it would be as well to rule out three traditional solutions that librarians tend to offer to any information problem. Persuading social workers to read more would be wasted effort; even if they had time, they do not have the inclination. Secondly, training them to use existing bibliographical tools would be almost equally a waste of time. While one would probably not be justified in saying that the use of abstracting and indexing journals is totally alien to social workers, the difficulty found by libraries in inducing academic research workers to use more than one or two suggests that the effort required to persuade social workers would be out of all proportion to the results obtained. Existing bibliographical tools of potential relevance, such as Sociological Abstracts and Psychological Abstracts, would require a vast amount of motivation and effort. The third traditional solution is to start a new abstracting or indexing service aimed specifically at social workers. As already mentioned, the potential range of literature is extremely large, and the compilation of such a journal would require an immense effort. When compiled, it would almost certainly remain unused by most social workers, if only on account of its bulk. Such a service already exists, although it is American, not British: Abstracts for Social Workers; its almost total unavailability in the U.K. does not suggest that the need for such a journal is great. The idea of a British service may however not be totally out of the reckoning, for reasons explained below.

It would seem wise to accept three factors as given: lack of motivation for searching on the part of social workers, shortage of time for reading, and an overwhelming preference for informal communication. This last is probably due as much to the personality of social workers and the nature of their everyday work as to inertia;

social workers are by nature person-oriented rather than literature-oriented. Any solutions offered should therefore take account of these factors, as well as recognising practical and economic constraints.

One superficially attractive solution would be a personalised information service, supplied by an information officer attached to a local authority. It is unlikely that such a person could be afforded by any but the largest local authorities. If such posts were created, a new indexing and abstracting service might be a practical possibility, since it could then be aimed at the information officer rather than direct at social workers; the information officer would do the social workers' searching for them.

A certain amount of improvement might be brought about by an increase in meetings between researchers and social workers; such meetings already take place to a small extent in university towns, and they seem to be fruitful to both sides, keeping the researchers aware of practical issues facing social workers, and keeping social workers in touch with at least some of the research being carried out. However, it would be almost impossible to organise such meetings on a sufficiently formal basis to constitute a real solution to the information problem, even if such meetings could take place over the whole country.

Little solution is left other than the production of some kind of digest, produced regularly and containing selective notes on research of potential practical relevance. These digests would have to be prepared with the greatest care by experts in the field - expert not only in the subjects digested, but in the art of communicating concisely and readably to social workers. They would have to be most carefully planned and designed to fulfil the requirements of readability and comprehensibility, without distorting the research findings. The question then arises how such digests are to be coordinated and organised, and whether they are to appear as separate publications or as parts of existing social work journals. There would seem to be very good reasons, not least economic, for including them in existing journals which social workers are known to read. As for coordination and planning, this again would seem to be best carried out by the specialist professional institutions, who would be aware, or who could make themselves aware, of appropriate experts and who could exercise the necessary coordination. As in the case of information on practical developments, information of interest to more than one major area of social work would be passed from one institution to another. A further question is whether digests should be 'once-off' products, to be discarded after use, or whether they should cumulate; if the latter, methods of indexing and access would have to be devised.

The solutions suggested imply a major role for the professional institutions, in gathering, digesting, indexing and organising a very large amount of information in a palatable way. To perform such a role, they would all need more information specialists, at a higher level of salary and standing, than they have at present. There is also a central coordinating role to be carried out, to ensure uniformity of records, indexing, classification, etc., so that information can be readily switched from one institution to another. This coordinating function could be based on one of the institutions, or on an academic institution. These proposals would cost something to implement, but they seem likely

to cost less, and be more effective, than other possible solutions. The cost could if necessary be recovered by subscriptions from local authorities, pro rata according to population served (this would be greatly preferable to charges for each consultation, which would deter use).

7. FUTURE RESEARCH

It would be unwise to embark on any full-scale plan of this kind without a trial. This leads to the final part of this report: the question of future research. It was suggested earlier that further direct exploration of the information needs of social workers would add little to our findings; the validity of direct exploration is in question in any case. Methods such as diary-keeping over a period by social workers are ruled out on grounds of practicability. There seems little alternative to the development of new trial services, trying out suggestions and ideas generated by our research and other relevant research, and evaluating services in terms of their effect. Valid evaluation of information services is extremely difficult to achieve, and requires a great deal of careful planning. One method of evaluation of a new service would be to take a few recent examples of practical developments or relevant research findings that had been covered in the service, and to ask a sample of social workers whether they knew of them, and if so how they had come across them. This would both establish whether the service had been used (or rather, whether it had communicated to them), and indicate the sources of information actually used by social workers. This method would require the use of interviews, but the interviews could be quite short. There are doubtless other methods of evaluation that could be used. Any service offered for payment has finally to stand or fall by market criteria, but these, if applied too early, could rule out a service which was sound in principle but badly designed.

The following point should be made quite explicit: the aim of user studies is not to gratify curiosity, but to provide information that will help in the development of improved services. Beyond a certain point, direct user studies show rapidly diminishing returns. The testing of new services has two advantages: it is a positive step forward, as compared with the delay inherent in continued user studies; and it enables valid information about the user to be collected, information which can in turn be used for the development of services - it may in fact be a <u>better</u> method of user study than the direct one.

APPENDIX A Draft Questionnaire for Social Workers - not used

Investigation into Information Requirements of the Social Sciences

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Name: _____ Mr./Mrs./Miss

2. Age group:

21 - 30	☐
31 - 40	☐
41 - 50	☐
51 -	☐

3. Academic & professional qualifications:

Degree or qualification	Date taken	Subject(s)

4. Institution or department where currently employed:

_____

5. Date you joined the institution or department: _____

6. Present status or position: _____

7. Year you first took up work of the kind you are doing at present:

_____

8. Please outline briefly the nature of your present job:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

For the purpose of this questionnaire, information is defined as all knowledge you obtain or wish to obtain, whether or not it is published. Information can be divided into four broad categories:

A. Routine information you need to carry out your ordinary work.

B. Specific facts or non-routine information, wanted occasionally.

C. Information about current practical developments in your profession.

D. Information about recent research or discoveries relevant to your work.

A. Probably most of the day-to-day information you require in connection with your work is obtained informally through personal channels, e.g. asking a colleague or ringing up the local authority. (An example would be information about the school background of a difficult child). For the present purposes we are not interested in this kind of information.

B. In addition to these day-to-day needs, you may have occasional needs for rather less routine information: e.g. how many children are fostered out in the U.K.

9. Please give, if you can, the three most recent examples of this sort of information need:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

10. Please mark in the table below, for each of the above examples, the sources you tried, with a ✓ for those that worked, a X for those that failed.

	Example number 1	2	3
Colleagues in own institution			
Colleagues elsewhere			
Local authority			
Professional body or society: national			
regional or local			
Public library			
Other (specify): _____			
_____			

11. If you wanted to find out how many youths discharged from Borstal were readmitted during 1967, where would you turn for this information? Please list the sources in the order you would actually try them.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

C,D. The other two broad categories of information are really "keeping up with developments" - the first with practical developments (e.g. experiments in community care of the mentally ill), the second with research findings (e.g. recent psychological research on the permanence of behaviour therapy). The questions we wish to ask about each are similar.

12. Do you attempt to keep up with practical developments in social work?

Yes ☐
No ☐
To some extent ☐

13. If so, how do you go about it?

14. Do you try to keep in touch with research findings of general interest to social work?

Yes ☐
No ☐
To some extent ☐

15. If so, how do you go about it?

16. If you wanted to find a few recent references (whether in books or periodicals) on the causes of premature senility, where would you turn?

Again, please list the sources you would try in the order you would try them.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

17. Do you feel able to keep as much in touch with relevant developments and research as you would like?

Yes ☐
No ☐

18. If "No", is this because of:

lack of time? ☐
not sure where to look? ☐
information not readily available ☐
any other reason? ☐

specify: _____

_____

(mark all reasons applicable)

19. What journals (including weeklies) do you read or scan?

Title	Read or scan		Useful for	
	Regularly	Occas-ionally	Practical trends*	Research findings*

* Tick both if both are applicable

20. What newspapers that you see regularly do you find of use in this way?

Title	Useful for Practical trends	Useful for Research findings

Conferences and courses:

for present purposes, these may be considered in three categories:

1. Series of lectures or classes
2. Short local (or regional) course (two days or less)
3. Conference or residential course
4. Occasional individual lecture or class

21. Would you please say, for each category, how many you have attended in the last 12 months, and the most recent one you have attended (whether in the last 12 months or not):

Category	No. attended in last year	Most recent one attended
1. Series		
2. Short course		
3. Conference		
4. Individual lecture		

22. Which category of course or conference do you consider most useful for:

keeping up with practical trends? 1 2 3 4

keeping up with research? 1 2 3 4

(ring no. applicable)

23. For conferences in general, which part do you find most useful?

	Useful for Practical trends	Useful for Research findings
Actual papers or lectures		
Discussion on papers or lectures		
Informal conversation with others attending		

24. What libraries do you use?

	Regularly	Occasionally

25. Can you give any recent example of information, of whatever kind, which you tried and failed to obtain?

26. Please name any other source of information you use which has not been mentioned during the course of this questionnaire and your answers:

Date Completed: _____

APPENDIX B Extract from Report on the preliminary stage of INFROSS (April 1968)

4.5 Information Needs of Social Workers

Although several attempts were made to obtain interviews with social workers, it proved possible to interview only three individuals (in a group) during the preliminary survey, all in the Probation Office at Newcastle. One of these was the chief probation officer, one was chiefly responsible for training, while the third was working "in the field". The following paragraphs are an amalgam of the impressions gained at this interview and of our own interpretations.

As in industry, the informal system is very important. When, as often, information is wanted about individuals, it is wanted very quickly indeed, and it is usually obtained by ringing up the appropriate person. The required contact may be in a school, or in any one of several different departments of the local authority: how satisfactory communication is between departments depends largely on personal factors. Experience - knowing whom to contact with the best chance of success - is obviously important, and newcomers are at a disadvantage. Even when not essential, the informal system is preferred by social workers: with their particular training, they find inter-personal communication the most natural and pleasant medium.

Conferences and courses are fairly frequent occurrences, and are important for background information. Formal papers, discussions, and informal contact are about equally important.

Social workers like to keep in touch with general trends and developments in their fields, whether practical or theoretical. Apart from conferences and courses, their main means of doing this is by personal contact with academics (where this is possible, it is thought to be valuable) and by scanning a very small number of professional journals.

References to published information are mostly obtained through informal channels, although some are picked up through book reviews and notes in professional journals. The reading of social workers thus has a large element of chance; presumably (and this could be tested) the reading of different social workers, even in the same fields, exhibits a great variety, and they have little reading matter in common.

There is a rather low information threshold, imposed partly by the limited time available for reading but partly by the anxiety likely to be caused by an overload of information: too great a body of knowledge may open up an excessively wide choice of alternatives and so inhibit the capacity for practical action. The very awareness that a vast corpus of potentially relevant information is in existence may cause some alarm and possibly a slight sense of guilt.

Social work has never been based on a solid body of theory, since there has never been a stable and generally accepted body of theory (e.g. in psychology) on which to base it. Changes in theoretical fashions, or even advances in fundamental knowledge, may therefore be a real threat to the patterns of practice that have become established in social work. Practice is usually, and perhaps wisely, several years behind theory: the pure milk of Freud had been well watered down in academic psychology long before it ceased to be the staple diet of social workers. For reasons such as these, there may be more reluctance than in industry to be exposed to large amounts of information, and this may impose rather special processing and packaging problems.

In spite of fears of an overload, there appears to be a clear need for more knowledge of trends in other countries - "what is happening in large American cities may happen here tomorrow".